**Waldeen (Waldeen Falkenstein, b. 1 February 1913, Dallas, Texas; d. 18 August 1993, Cuernavaca, Mexico)**

**Summary**

For more than half a century, Waldeen made important contributions to modern dance in Mexico. Along with Anna Sokolow, Waldeen has been considered one of the ‘founding mothers’ of Mexican modern dance. She worked to adapt foreign modern dance techniques and styles to reflect Mexican sensibilities, culture, society, politics and contemporary artistic currents. As a dance theorist, Waldeen believed in socially committed art that reflected upon the society which created and consumed it. Putting theory into practice, Waldeen studied Mexico’s history and present-day realities, and through a process of collaboration with Mexican-born artists, consolidated a nationalist modern dance aesthetic that resonated with the visual and musical arts of the 1930s and 1940s. In this way, Waldeen gave modern dance, until then identified as a North American or European art form, the national credence it had previously lacked. Through her writings, choreography, performance and teaching, Waldeen influenced a whole generation of Mexican dancers and choreographers, including Guillermina Bravo (founder of the Ballet Nacional de México, an important centre for teaching modern and contemporary dance) and Amalia Hernández (founder of the Ballet Folklórico de México, a world-renowned company which interprets and performs Mexico’s most important folk and regional dances).

**Training**

Born in Texas, Waldeen began to study ballet in Los Angeles with the Russians Theodore Kosloff and his wife Maria Alexandra Baldina, and the British dancer Vera Fredowa (Winifred Edwards). At thirteen, Waldeen debuted as a soloist with the Kosloff Ballet and the Los Angeles Opera Company. Two years later, she gave up ballet for modern dance, studying with Benjamin Zemach, a Russian-trained choreographer, theatre director and teacher, and two of Mary Wigman’s students, Harald Kreutzberg and Yvonne Georgi. In 1932, Waldeen joined Michio Ito’s company for a three-year tour of the United States, Canada, Mexico and Japan. Throughout this period, Waldeen studied philosophy and music and wrote poetry. Inspired by Isadora Duncan and the art of Beethoven, El Greco, Leonardo da Vinci and William Blake, Waldeen was also fascinated by Eastern art and philosophy.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Waldeen was a foundational figure in the development of Mexican modern dance of the 1940s and 1950s. In 1939, the Mexican government commissioned Waldeen to form a modern dance company, the Ballet de Belles Artes. During her tenure as the company’s artistic director, she developed a uniquely Mexican modern dance vocabulary that brought modern dance into conversation with other Mexican art forms. Observers hailed her work as bringing to life the murals of the visual artists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco.

*La Coronela* (*The Colonel*), a work she choreographed in 1940 was a watershed in Mexican dance history, marking the emergence of modern dance as a national art form. Waldeen collaborated with the composers Silvestre Revueltas and Blas Galindo, the costume and scene designer Gabriel Fernández Ledesma and the director Seki Sano. The four-episode ballet, in which she played a revolutionary heroine, depicted how the Mexican Revolution (1910-17) redeemed the nation from a corrupt and oppressive past.

Waldeen’s theoretical ideas (published in a 1951 essay and elaborated in a 1982 monograph) informed her choreography. She rejected the notion of ‘pure dance’, because it was based on the artist’s separation from society. She believed that dance artists must take full part in society and create works which reflected broad social concerns and furthered progressive social transformations. To create a ‘Mexican’ choreography, Waldeen studied the country’s Amerindian past and mestizo present. (‘Mestizo’ refers to people of Spanish and indigenous descent. The post-revolutionary nationalist discourse championed the idea that all Mexicans were ‘mestizo’.). Thematically her work dealt with issues of gender, class and social justice. Over the years, Waldeen shared her ideas about the importance of socially aware and nationalist art to her students which became key tenets of Mexican modern dance.

In the early 1960s, at the invitation of Fidel Castro’s government, Waldeen moved to Cuba to teach and choreograph. In the late 1960s she returned to Mexico City and for the next two decades taught, choreographed and organised dance conferences until ill health compelled her to retire in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

**Legacy**

Waldeen adapted the techniques of modern dance to a Mexican context, taking into account the country’s history and ideologies of post-revolutionary artistic nationalism. She encouraged cross-border artistic exchanges throughout the Americas, travelling with dancers to Central America, the United States and the Caribbean. Her ideas about socially committed and nationalist art influenced a generation of Mexican dancers and continue to reverberate in Mexican modern dance today.

**List of Works**

*Seventh Century Sequence* (1938)

*Credo* (1938)

*Salutation* (1938)

*Restatement of Romance* (1938)

*Juba* (1938)

*Prelude* (1938)

*Dance for Regeneration* (1938)

*Three Negro Spirituals* (1938)

*Epigrams: Fragments of Old Spain* (1938)

*Las danzas clásicas* (*Classical Dances*,1940)

*Procesional* (*Processional*, 1940)

*Danzas de las fuerzas nuevas* (*Dances of the New Forces*, 1940)

*La Coronela* (1940)

*Siembra* (*Sowing Time*, 1945)

*Elena la traicionera* (*Elena the Traitor*, 1945)

*Suite de danzas* (*Suite of Dances*, 1945)

*Cinco danzas en ritmo búlgaro* (*Five Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm*, 1945)

*Allegreto de la 5a. Sinfonía* (*Allegretto of the Fifth Symphony*, 1945)

*Valses* (*Waltzes*, 1945)

*Sonatas españolas* (*Spanish Sonatas*, 1945)

*En la boda* (*At the Wedding*, 1945)

*La Doncella del Trigo* (*Maiden of the Wheat*, 1945)

*Tres preludios* (*Three Preludes*, 1945)

*Sinfonía concertante para violín y viola* (*Symphonie Concertante for Violin and Viola*, 1945)

*Homenaje a García Lorca* (*Homage to García Lorca*, 1949)

*Preludio y Fuga* (*Prelude and Flight*, 1950)

*Tres ventanas a la vida patria* (*Three Windows to the Life of One’s Country*, 1952)

*Coro de primavera* (*Spring Chorus*, 1954)

*Horas de junio* (*June Hours*, 1959)

*La rama dorada* (*The Golden Bough*, 1959)

*Sombras de la ciudad* (*Shadows of the City*, 1959)

*Concierto de Brandenburgo, No. 2* (*Brandenburg Concerto No. 2*, 1959)

*Divertimento* (1952)

*Contra la muerte* (*Against Death*, 1952)

*El hombre es hecho de maíz* (*Man is Made of Maize*, 1960)

*La zafra* ( *Sugar-Making Season*, 1962)

*Solidaridad* (*Solidarity*,1962)

*Tiempo entre dos tiempos* (*Time Between Two Cycles*, 1969)

*El espacio y el tiempo* (*Space and Time*, 1969)

*Asilo del alba* (*Asylum of the Dawn*, 1973)

*Tres danzas para un mundo nuevo* (*Three Dances for a New World*, 1976)

*Tres rostros de Carmen Serdán* (*Three Faces of Carmen Serdán*, 1984)

*Seres de maíz* (*Beings of Maize*, 1984)

**References and Further Reading**

Cohen, J. (1998) ‘Waldeen and the Americas: The Dance Has Many Faces’. In *A Woman’s Gaze: Latin American Women Artists*. Edited by Marjorie Agosín. Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press. (A comprehensive biographical sketch of Waldeen’s life, art and ideas with revealing insights on how her prose and poetry, both her translations and original works, related to her career as a dance artist)

Delgado Martínez, C. (2000) *Waldeen: La Coronela de la danza mexicana*, México, D. F.: Escenología. (An overview of Waldeen’s life, work and legacy in Mexico based on newspaper and journal articles, performance programmes and interviews, supplemented by a chronology and reprints of some of Waldeen’s writings)

Tortajada Quiroz, M. (2008) ‘*La Coronela* de Waldeen: una danza revolucionaria’, *Casa del Tiempo* 4 (8): 54-60. (An essay on Waldeen’s most celebrated dance).

On-line version:

http://www.uam.mx/difusion/casadeltiempo/08\_iv\_jun\_2008/casa\_del\_tiempo\_eIV\_num08\_54\_60.pdf

Tortajada Quiroz, M. (2001) ‘Transformación y rompimiento: la danza moderna de Anna Sokolow y Waldeen’. *Frutos de Mujer*. México, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, Centro Nacional de Investigación, Documentación, e Información de la Danza (CENIDIDANZA). (An examination of the works and lives of Anna Sokolow and Waldeen in Mexico)

‘Waldeen’ (1987) *Cuadernos del CID-Danza*. México, D.F. no. 17. (Includes a biographical essay on Waldeen by the Mexican dance historian Josefina Lavalle, excerpts from Waldeen’s writings, a chronology of her life and work, and testimonials by critics and notable cultural figures including the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros and the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda)

Waldeen (1982) *La danza: Imagen de creación continua*, México, D.F.: Difusión Cultural UNAM, Departamento de Danza y Fondo Nacional para las Actividades Sociales. (Waldeen’s ideas about dance, art and life)

Waldeen (1951) ‘Social Influences and Emotional Motivation’. In *The Dance Has Many Faces*. Edited by Walter Sorell. Cleveland: World Publishing Company. (An essay in which Waldeen rejects the notion of ‘pure dance’ and argues that dance is a ‘profoundly moral art’ derived from social experience)

**Moving Image Material**

*Waldeen & Xavier Francis: vivir danzando* (2002) México, D.F. : C/Producciones. (A documentary about Waldeen and her work, among others)

**Websites**

Cohen, J. ‘Waldeen and the Americas: The Dance Has Many Faces’. (An on-line version of the essay cited above in *A Woman’s Gaze*, with photographs of Waldeen and her dances)

<http://www.uhmc.sunysb.edu/surgery/waldeen.html>

Diego Rivera’s tribute to Waldeen (from the on-line version of J. Cohen’s essay)

<http://www.uhmc.sunysb.edu/surgery/wald-riv.html>

**Photographs**

The principal source of images of Waldeen's career can be found on Jonathan Cohen's website, “Waldeen and the Americas: The Dance Has Many Faces,” [http://www.uhmc.sunysb.edu/surgery/waldeen.html](https://mail.uvic.ca/owa/redir.aspx?C=Tn-0XSbf2k23uLzIwrhjo8kDoT6BR89I5TpvvDfJySKyPJQroiDZuKFEgHwKlNcQNiooFJP0RiY.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.uhmc.sunysb.edu%2fsurgery%2fwaldeen.html)

For additional images of Waldeen in *La Coronela*, see:  Razetti, Ricardo ed. (1940) *“La Coronela” Ballet del Teatro de las Artes: 35 fotografías originales del Taller “Alvarez Bravo.”* Mexico City.

Elizabeth Schwall